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ABSTRACT

The situation in which an individual refers not to himself but to his role (e.g., a dean says, "It is the responsibility of the Dean..." instead of "It is my responsibility...") is considered. It is argued that in some circumstances, when a speaker uses certain kinds of definite descriptions to refer to himself, he may be attempting to deter the hearer from attaching any beliefs or associations, connected to whoever or whatever is delimited by the definite description, to the speaker himself. How this is achieved is difficult to specify. Where the hearer is not motivated to seek a referentially specific entity, he may simply treat the description as generic or attributive and perceive any beliefs about the referring description in these terms, with the result that any conclusions or inferences are not bound to any designated individual. Although the analysis is based on one example from political commentary, the behavior is commonplace. Research on the occurrence of such situations, and on speaker interpretations, are seen as supporting this approach. (MSE)

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John Wilson

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# CONSTRUCTIVE BELIEFS AND POLITICAL REFERENCE*

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In reply to parliamentary criticism of his attack on the BBC's coverage of the United States' bombing of Libya Norman Tebbit (NT) responded that '... it was not the Chancellor the Duchy of Lancaster (hereafter CODL) who made the complaint but the Chairman of the Conservative party...' (Hansard, November 17th 1986). What is interesting about this choice and use of definite description is that Norman Tebbitt was both the CODL and the Chairman of the Conservative party. While the interaction of this dual set of definite descriptions is interesting in itself, in this paper I want to focus on the general issue of self reference under definite description, and although my arguments attend to NT's reference to himself as the CODL, they would apply equally well to his reference to himself as the Chairman of the Conservative party.

The type of referring form used by NT can be found in many different contexts. My Dean recently used the phrase: it is the function of the Dean to ... etc. The choice of expression is not then particularly remarkable. But one must ask, since both speakers had perfectly acceptable alternatives available to them, i.e., 'it is my function/responsibility', or 'it was me who complained about the BBC', why they chose to refer to themselves in this particular manner.

Intuitively, one might suggest that the distinction is an indicator of 'role' identification, that speakers who have a variety of roles merely wish to specify a particular role relevant to the unfolding discourse. Even if this were the case, it would not explain why it is that such a

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choice is not made on every occasion where it would be possible, suggesting some sociolinguistic/pragmatic grounding in a particular selection: nor does it explain how audiences operate in processing such information, since the effects are significantly different for those audiences who are aware that the definite description refers to the speaker and those who do not have such information (it should be noted that parliamentary debates are broadcast to a radio audience, as well as being made available in a written form in Hansard).

This last claim may seem odd in that it is generally assumed that speakers only use definite descriptions when they can rely on their audience to retrieve the reference. But this assumption must be assessed against a context where a definite description, even if the reference is retrievable, has been employed where the expected form could equally easily have been a self referential pronoun. The puzzle of choice is what I attempt to work out below.

In this paper I want to argue that for both audiences who know that NT=CODL and audiences who do not know NT=CODL difficulties arise, and that the choice of the type of description employed by NT under conditions of self reference may act as a play to deflect specific individual responsibility for certain mentioned behaviours. My concern is 'pragmatic' in so far as I want to explain the effects of a particular contextual choice on the processing of meaning.

## Reference and Intentions

'Reference' is a major problem for both linguists and philosophers; it is not my aim here, however, to review the vast literature on referring (for a general perspective see Devitt and Sterelny 1987; on more specific issues Quine 1969; Castefiada, 1968; 1975; Cole, 1979; Boer & Lycan, 1980; 1986). My initial concern is with the distinction made by Donnellan (1966) between the referential and attributive use of definite descriptions. This distinction is based on the principle that speakers' intentions play a major role in distinguishing how an expression is being employed in referring (contra: Russell and Frege). If a speaker uses a

definite description referentially then he/she intends the hearer to pick out a specific designated individual. On the other hand, if a speaker uses a definite description attributively the intention is not to designate a specific individual the speaker has in mind, but rather to state something about whoever or whatever is designated by the description.

Finding Smith's dead body, we might draw the conclusion that there has been a murder. We might, in such circumstances, express the view that 'Smith's murderer is insane' without knowing who the murderer was. In this case one would be using the description attributively. If it turns out that Smith died of natural causes then the description fails as an attributive act. On the other hand, if one were to say at a party that 'the tall woman drinking white wine is a teacher', and it turns out that she is in fact drinking water, then it is still possible, where you are correctly understood, that you would have successfully designated a specific individual.

This view of reference offers one possible explanation for the behaviour of Norman Tebbit; at least at a descriptive level. One might argue that when NT refers to himself as the CODL his intention is to use the referring expression attributively. The explicit aim is not to specify a specific individual but whoever is designated by the description. This may seem odd on a common sense view, particularly for those who know that Tebbit is the CODL. But let us concede, for the moment, that if NT can get his audience to think about the individual who is the topic of talk in attributive terms, then any responsibility claims will not be embodied in any single identified person but rather in generic terms relative to whoever or whatever may be the case. The advantage here for any person who is attacked for performing certain actions is that hearers are being directed away from focusing on that person as a specific individual.

Taking this claim as a starting point, and assuming that it is plausible (as far as it goes), how can we explain such an interpretation; and further, how does such a claim take account of the interpretive options available to those audiences who know NT is the CODL as opposed to those audiences who do not? For those who are not aware of the identity

equivalence (in the real world), they clearly cannot equate any beliefs or attributes of NT with those of whoever is the CODL, since the assumption is that the identity for them is unknown. In the case of those who are aware of the identity equivalence the problem of explaining any interpretive behaviour is more complicated. Surely they can simply substitute NT for the CODL. For example: NT is speaking, NT is the CODL, therefore the CODL is speaking. I don't want to consider whether such a substitution operates successfully in all environments which might be constructed for the sake of philosophical debate (as in opaque contexts, or contexts of self reference under loss of memory or perceptual trickery: see for example Casteñada, 1968; Quine, 1969); I take it as given that in the real world of discourse that if I know NT=CODL, then it is plausible for me, in constructing models of the actions of NT or the CODL, to treat these identities as intersubstitutable.

If this is true then what is to be gained from using the expression CODL as opposed to some other self referring expression? Perhaps it is the case that the ambiguity inherent in Donnellan's distinction allows NT to 'hedge' (Lakoff, 1972) on any identity claims. Consider (1):

(1) A. Can you fix this needle for me?

B. I'm busy

A. I was only asking if you could fix it.

Most normal speakers of English will recognise that A's first turn has the conventional form of an indirect speech act (Searle, 1975). The problem with such acts is that it is theoretically unclear whether they function as multiple or single units for interpretation (in the above case the first turn could be both question and request). For speakers who use such indirect forms there is an advantage to be had, in that you can always claim of any two interpretations (a) and (b) that only one was intended, the one which suits your purpose. In the case of NT's use of the CODL as a referring phrase under conditions of identity equivalence, similar options seem available. NT can claim either that he was refer-

ring to himself, or that he was referring to a role which he just happens to hold (indeed, this claim would fit with Donnellan's suggestion that attributive uses may not refer at all: see Searle, 1979 for a counter view).

There are a number of difficulties here however. Firstly, the use of the referring description has different effects on different audiences, suggesting that whether some expression is referring or attributive is not completely constrained by speakers intentions alone (see Johnson-Laird and Garnham, 1980). The hearer's knowledge of the world in which the expression is used plays a part. Secondly, despite the social role theory, if NT=CODL, and I know this to be true, I know it to be true whether it is explicitly expressed or not. In this case then we need some further pragmatic explanation to account for any rôle interpretation where it emerges via some expressions and not others. Thirdly, why should hearers, as rational agents, believe that the degree or extent of responsibility for actions is in any way mitigated by the use of certain referentially equivalent descriptive phrases?

In order to deal with these questions we need a theory which allows us to take account of the interaction of speaker/hearers' knowledge and beliefs at particular points in the production of interactive discourse. We should not assume that simply because a speaker makes an utterance following certain principles of communication, and with a specific communicative intention (as in the case of Gricean rules for example) that each hearer will necessarily interpret the utterance exactly as intended. Different audiences will react in different ways depending on their own knowledge and beliefs.

I don't think we can ever guarantee the way in which what we say will be interpreted; we depend on conventions rather than hard and fast categorical rules for understanding. Within the conventional expectations of how an utterance would normally be interpreted, however, we can calculate probabilities for different audience responses and select the expression most likely to succeed (see Leech, 1983). Since conventions are generalisations across behaviours, they are abstracted and analysed at specific moments in time relative to our individual concerns and the unfolding interaction. What we need is some way of expressing the con-

ventional interpretation of what NT has said independently of the discourse context, then we can use this as a basis for considering the interpretive and reinterpretive options available to participants within the actual discourse context as it is processed.

## Constructive Beliefs

In order to explain how we might deal with speaker/hearer interpretive options I want to consider what Wilks has referred to as a 'constructive theory' of beliefs. Wilks argues that beliefs are processed and understood in terms of specific belief environments. These environments are organisational belief spaces which speaker/hearers employ in achieving understanding. What is particularly important about Wilks' perspective is that the model seems to allow for selective processing, by which I mean that one can select specific environments in which to run arguments; with the obvious consequence that each different environment may create different outcomes from basically the same input material. An example from Wilks will clarify this:

(2) User. Frank is coming tomorrow, I think

System. Perhaps I should leave (I)

User. Why?

System. Coming from you, that is a warning.

User. Does Frank dislike you?

System. I don't know (II) but you think he does, and that is what is important now.

The problem in this example results, argues Wilks, from the fact that beliefs of different types are being run in different environments. The basic issue is that one needs to distinguish between the user's beliefs about Frank's beliefs, the system's beliefs about Frank's beliefs,

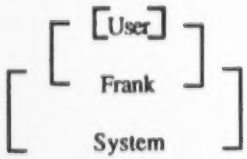
and Frank's actual beliefs. At points (I) and (II) the system is 'running knowledge about individuals in different environments'.

Wilks uses the following notational approach to represent belief relations.

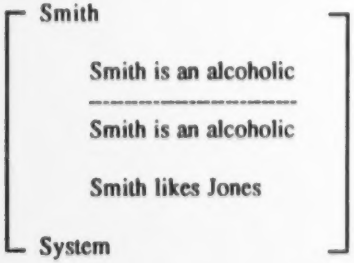
[Frank]

System

This indicates the system's beliefs about Frank. Such structures can be nested as in:




This represents the system's beliefs about Frank's beliefs about the user. A further distinction is drawn between A's beliefs about B and A's beliefs about B's beliefs. A line is drawn within diagrammatic representations to indicate this distinction.




Such a distinction is made because it is possible to believe that Smith is an alcoholic without believing that Smith himself believes this.

Now applying this approach to the case of NT, and considering his utterance as an independent unit, we can construct sample belief environments relative to whether the hearer knows or does not know that NT=CODL. If the hearer knows that NT=CODL then beliefs about the CODL at this point in time will be the same as beliefs about NT; consequently, despite the fact that some extra processing may be required this does not seem relevant to the belief environment itself.

(3) (a)

H know NT=CODL

NT

NT=CODL

R(BBC)

---

NT=CODL

R(BBC)

Criticise (BBC)

Hearer

(b) H not know NT=CODL

CODL

?

---

CODL = R(BBC)

Criticise (BBC)

Hearer

It is clear from representation (b) that any implications or inferences which might be drawn will not be attached to any specific individual. The symbol ? indicates here that since the identity of CODL is not known, it is difficult for the hearer to have beliefs about the beliefs of this unknown individual (this is, of course, not impossible, but certainly highly implausible). In representation (a) we would be capable of drawing conclusions (which can be extended in terms of the number and type of beliefs we run) which are clearly linked to the identity of NT. But, of course, we already knew this. What I want to suggest, however, is that some hearers who know NT=CODL may actually run beliefs in environment (b) as opposed to environment (a); which would mean, of course, that even though they know NT=CODL, in this context they do not attach conclusions to a specific identity.

**Persevering with Beliefs**

The problem with my suggestion that speakers who know NT=CODL may nevertheless run beliefs in an environment where he is not specifically identified, is that it seems to be counter to common sense. On the other hand, it would not be possible for speaker/hearers to bring to bear every item of possible relevance to each and every utterance. This is the whole point of Sperber and Wilson's (1986) theory of relevance. Speaker/hearers must somehow work out the relative importance of certain elements of information; this theory, however, simply explains the necessary principles of relevance, it does not deal with the negotiated nature of such relevance, in that any utterance in context may be n ways relevant (perhaps all equally compatible); the hearer's interpretive conclusion is guided by the belief set operating at a particular moment in time. One factor which plays a part in this process is the speaker/hearers' own specific motivations at a particular point within interaction. Speaker/hearer motivation (along with contextual input) helps explain how the referential oddity of the kinds of examples noted by Nunberg (1978; 1979; cf. Brown and Yule, 1983) can be understood. Consider the following case, where a waiter who is going off duty might say: *the ham sandwich is sitting at table 20*. In part, such a phrase will make sense to the hearer only in so far as he/she is moti-

vated to search for a link between the referring phrase and an actual entity (a customer as opposed to an actual sandwich). The link may be clear within an abstract model of discourse which contains a script for waiters and their behaviour, but ultimately it is the hearer's prerogative to interpret the utterance in relation to his own needs at a particiular point in time. Consequently, for a hearer less interested in proving that individual responsibility for attacking the BBC lies with NT, there may be less motivation to run beliefs about the CODL referentially (as NT) as opposed to attributively (as whoever he may be) (see Gibbs, 1987: 582 on some relevant experimental evidence related to selective reference location).

Evidence for this suggestion can be found in one view of the way in which beliefs are organised. Social psychologists have noted in experiments where a subject's beliefs have been manipulated, that such subjects find it difficult to re-adjust their belief system when the 'contrived and inauthentic nature' of the information they had been given is revealed (see Ross and Anderson, 1982; Harman, 1986). It has been suggested that many beliefs, once established, are maintained by a kind of 'habit theory' (Harman, 1986: 37), and that such habits may even be neurologically salient (see Goldman, 1978; cf. Harman, 1986).

Taking up a point made earlier, that a speaker would be expected when talking of himself/herself to make it clear that that is what they are doing (see Boer and Lycan, 1980; 1986); and treating this expectation as a general belief which we would accept unless motivated to reject otherwise, then for those hearers who know NT=CODL, but who are not motivated to pay particular attention to such a fact, the habit of believing that where a speaker talks of himself he will make this clear, may lead them to run beliefs within an environment similar to that constructed by hearers who do not know NT=CODL. Put simply, since NT has not used any explicitly available self referential form he is not referring to himself. This is a kind of default argument, whereby unless the hearer is motivated otherwise, all speaker generic references to self will be treated as attributive rather than referential.

The problem here, of course, is that such an argument seems to contradict the classic Gricean view, that when speakers flout maxims of behaviour they imply information above and beyond the surface interpretation of the utterance itself. But this is of course a speaker intention. If the hearer, for his own purposes, can make sense of the speaker's utterance using the surface form alone, and there is no self-motivating reason to process the utterance any further (hearer intention) then he/she is free to do so. Example cases of conversational implicature in the literature are frequently extreme, in that no further sense can be made of the ongoing discourse without recourse to some implicated information. In the case of the NT utterance, hearers who are aware that NT=CODL can still make sense of what is said without explicitly accessing the fact that NT=CODL, they are free to ignore such facts. We should not assume that because our theory suggests further information can be gleaned by processing implicatures that it is compulsory for hearers to do so. I can find nothing wrong with the following interchange:

(4) A. NT was just trying to worm his way out of the situation

B. No he was just indicating that he was doing his job

C. What do you mean?

A. Well NT is the CODL

C. Of course, that's right, but its not really relevant. Someone has to deal with the BBC.

In (4) speaker (A) has processed the information that NT=CODL and come to a particular conclusion about this; (B) has processed the same information and come to a different conclusions; (C) didn't process the information at all, although he had access to such information, but for (C) the information isn't relevant anyway since he/she sees a general logic to the argument relative to whoever the CODL is.

Taking account of such facts, my argument is not a contradictory of Grice's position but a complementary component. As Johnson-Laird and Garnham (1980) suggested, information is processed relative to both hearer and speaker models of the world. To suggest of any utterance that it carries an implicature indicates only a potentiality for interpretation. Speakers may intend an implicature to be calculated or they may not; hearers may calculate an implicature or they may not. Speaker/hearers perform interpretation in terms of their own interests and motivations, these may coincide for discourse processing, but in many cases this is not a *sine qua non*. Consequently, we should not think of relevance as an optimal informational state jointly agreed by participants (as in Sperber and Wilson, 1986). This may be the ideal, but in real time discourse there are too many intervening variables to guarantee the complete co-ordination of speaker/hearer interests and interpretations.

If my argument is correct it increases the validity of choosing a referring form which, while self referential, could be treated as attributive, particularly in those circumstances where one wishes to deflect personal responsibility. Since one cannot deter the motivated hearer from tagging you with blame, one can at least attempt to offset this fact by leading the general audience to either a non-identification-based conclusion, or an identity-based conclusion with the added, and mitigating, implicature that the speaker is only doing his job.

This view further suggests that one must be careful in extrapolating from theories of relevance to the processing of relevance in the real world. As Johnson-Laird and Garnam (1980) point out, it is possible for the speaker and hearer to operate with different views of the world (which may be adjusted, if necessary, in processing input). Consequently, relevance is itself relative to the contents of speaker/hearer models of the world, and the speaker/hearer's motivation in processing and accessing certain information within such models.

## Summary and Conclusion

The argument here has been that, in some circumstances, when a speaker uses certain kinds of definite description to self refer, he/she may be attempting to deter the hearer from attaching any beliefs or associations, connected with whoever or whatever is delimited by the definite description, to the speaker him/herself.

How this is actually achieved is difficult to specify in exact terms. But I have argued here that where the hearer is not motivated to seek a referentially specific entity he/she may simply treat the description as generic or attributive and run any beliefs about the referring description in these terms; with the consequence, of course, that any conclusions or inferences which follow from the belief environment are not bound to any designated individual. Even where the hearer does run beliefs in a referential mode, the extra processing effort may lead to a mitigating implicature (but this is not guaranteed).

The argument is of course theoretical, bounded by one main example, although, as I suggested at the beginning of the paper, the behaviour I was concerned with is one readily recognisable in everyday interaction. It would be useful however, to empirically consider whether the overall distribution of the kinds of example discussed above can be generally found where the speaker wishes to protect himself, or some other individual. Work is underway here (see Wilson in progress; also Maitland and Wilson, 1987) and the initial, and tentative answer, seems to be positive. Further, work on selection within discourse processing (see Brown and Yule, 1983: Ch. 5) does indicate that speakers' interpretations are affected by their own general and idiosyncratic interests. Consequently, the suggestion that belief environments may be limited and constrained by conventional expectations, even under conditions where information for modifying the environment is available, is certainly plausible.

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